

N.Y. Bomb Plotters Sentenced to Long Terms

Sheik Gets Life

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NEW YORK, JAN. 17 -- Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman and nine others convicted with him last fall of plotting to bomb bridges, tunnels and buildings in Manhattan and kidnap key political figures were sentenced today in federal court here to terms ranging from 25 years to life in prison.

The sentences in one of the most ambitious terrorist plots in U.S. history were handed out one by one by U.S. District Judge Michael B. Mukasey, beginning in the morning with the most marginal members of what prosecutors described as a Muslim terrorist cell and ending, dramatically, in late afternoon with Abdel Rahman, the blind Egyptian cleric who was the group's ringleader.

Before he was sentenced, the 57-year-old sheik, wearing his trademark white and red hat, delivered an angry, rambling 90-minute address that touched on the memoirs of former president Richard M. Nixon, birth control, homosexuality, former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, the CIA, the American habit of calling news conferences, his green card and AIDS.

"This is an infidel country," the cleric declared, through a translator, in a speech that ended only after the repeated interventions of the judge. "It has an infidel White House. It has an infidel Congress. It has an infidel Pentagon. And this is an infidel courthouse."

Abdel Rahman was given a sentence of life without parole plus 65 years. If he had not been foiled, Mukasey told the cleric, his acts would have caused "devastation on a scale not seen in this country since the Civil War."

Today's sentencing brings to an end a saga that began in the late 1980s, when U.S. authorities in Jersey City and New York began surveillance on a group of Muslims, many of whom were recent immigrants from the Middle East affiliated with Abdel Rahman. In June 1993, four months after the World Trade Center bombing, FBI agents arrested five men as they were concocting a brew of chemicals in a Queens garage. From there, more arrests were made until the FBI claimed that it had uncovered a massive terrorist conspiracy aimed at intimidating the United States into changing its Middle East policies.

In conversations taped by the FBI, the group discussed killing Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and blowing up a series of New York City landmarks in a coordinated daylong attack. The targets, prosecutors said, included the United Nations headquarters, the federal building housing the FBI and the three major transportation links between Manhattan and New Jersey -- the Lincoln and Holland tunnels and the George Washington Bridge. They also talked of kidnapping Nixon.

The trial of the 10 men alleged to be part of the plot lasted nearly nine months, with 200 witnesses and hundreds of exhibits, and ended last fall in complete victory for the government. The jury, after deliberating for seven days, agreed with the prosecution on virtually every charge, convicting all 10 men on 25 separate counts of sedition, bombing and criminal conspiracy.

Because most of the charges on which the 10 were convicted carry mandatory sentences, there were few surprises today in the long prison terms handed down by Mukasey. But the hearing had moments of theater, nonetheless, as the convicted men offered statements in their own defense. Almost all young, almost all dressed identically in blue prison garb and white Islamic skullcaps, and almost all of them caught on videotape mixing explosives or on audiotape discussing plans to paralyze New York City and kill hundreds of people, all protested their innocence.

"Since I grow up, I hate the violence. I love the peace," said Mohammed Saleh, who spoke in English. "My life, my education, my record speaks for itself." He was convicted, among other things, of procuring the fuel oil used to make the bombs and sentenced today to 35 years.

The attorney for another defendant, Victor Alvarez, claimed that even as he willingly joined with the other conspirators, his "limited capacity" mentally prevented him from knowing what was going on. But Mukasey found nothing convincing in that argument, replying, "People who are killed by people with limited capacities are just as dead as people killed by geniuses." Alvarez was sentenced to 35 years.

One of the attorneys for El Sayyid Nosair, who had earlier been convicted by the jury of, among other things, racketeering charges in the 1990 slaying of Jewish Defense League leader Rabbi Meir Kahane, even went so far as to read a form letter from the Israeli Embassy thanking Nosair for his written condolences on the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

Nosair was sentenced to 75 years plus life.

But perhaps the most surreal moment of the day came during the sheik's address. Abdel Rahman was given an hour to state his case to the court before receiving his sentence. But, reading from braille cards and shouting out his speech in sentence fragments to the translator next to him, Abdel Rahman easily exceeded that time. The United States, he said, was Islam's greatest enemy, a country intent on wiping Islam from the face of the Earth. The case against him, he said, was simply a part of this campaign, an attempt to silence him because of his religion.

As Abdel Rahman wended his way through his remarks, alluding to books by Nixon as well as touching on the Suez Crisis and surveillance of him in a prison bathroom, Mukasey repeatedly tried to stop him.

When he finally succeeded, the judge delivered a lecture of his own, telling the sheik that he was being sent to prison for the rest of his life not because of his religious beliefs, but because he was the "leader of a terrorist conspiracy" that had planned a campaign that would have "cost hundreds if not thousands of lives" and made "the World Trade Center bombing seem of little consequence."

"There are thousands of Muslims in this country who contribute as productive, loyal and peaceful citizens," Mukasey said. The sheik, he added, wasn't one of them.